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ABSTRACT

This fact sheet reviews the role of advisory boards and boards of directors in the context of crisis nursery and respite care programs for families with special needs members. Typical responsibilities of advisory boards are listed, including program creation and planning, development of program policy, planning and implementing public relations, providing funding leadership, and developing subcommittees. Special concerns of crisis nursery and respite programs which are integrated into larger organizations are noted. Specific legal requirements of boards of directors (e.g., developing policy and providing direction to the executive director) are mentioned and typical responsibilities are listed, including providing vision and planning, supervising the executive director, providing funding leadership, providing financial oversight, engaging in self-assessment activities, and planning and implementing public relations. Guidelines for recruiting both advisory boards and boards of directors are offered. Other aspects addressed include the training and retention of board members and energizing existing boards. Several organizational and print resources are suggested. (DB)

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Advisory Boards and Boards of Directors

Introduction

Crisis nursery and respite care programs will rely on the advice and support of numerous people during the many phases of their existence. Two important administrative bodies which may provide direction and support to crisis nursery and respite care programs are the advisory board and the board of directors. The structure of the program or parent organization will determine whether the program receives advice from one or both entities. The following information provides an overview of both types of boards.

Advisory Boards

Effective advisory boards are critical to the success of crisis nursery and respite care programs. Having an independent body of community leaders, parents, and other interested community members can be key to building a secure, ongoing program.

The advisory board plays an important public relations role, as well as, providing program staff with a fresh perspective on programmatic issues. In addition, working with an advisory board may increase the organization's potential to broaden its funding through contacts for in-kind resources, and for direct financial support.

Each advisory board member brings something unique to the program. Some members will take responsibility for specific tasks. Other members will not be able to accept specific responsibilities, but will attend meetings and provide valuable input. Others may not be able to attend many meetings, but have good contacts or can carry out a specific function independently. Some board members may not be able to attend meetings or take any specific responsibilities, yet their support, even if in name only, may be important because it lends credibility to the project.

Advisory Board Responsibilities

Advisory boards do not have any legal authority, therefore all of their responsibilities are assigned at the discretion of the executive director and/or board of directors. Responsibilities assigned to an advisory board may include any or all of the following.

- ***Program Creation and Planning.*** It can be beneficial to create an advisory board during the early stages of developing a program so that board members can provide advice concerning the design and plans for the program. It is easiest to begin with a small advisory board, for example, four to seven community leaders and community members (including parents), during the planning process.
- ***Development of Program Policy.*** While advisory boards cannot create legally binding policies for the organization, they can help create policies which provide direction and support for the program staff.
- ***Planning and Implementing Public Relations.*** An advisory board which includes influential community leaders and parent advocates can be effective at spreading the word about program services.
- ***Funding Leadership.*** Often advisory boards are created specifically to raise program funds. The advisory board must be granted this authority by the executive director or the board of directors. Individuals committed to the organization with the influence to leverage resources will be most successful.
- ***Subcommittees.*** The advisory board may develop subcommittees which have assigned tasks in specific areas. For example, a public awareness subcommittee composed of four members may be responsible for making recommendations about public awareness strategies and resources. Subcommittees may be short-lived according to a specific assignment or ongoing.
- ***Other Tasks.*** Advisory boards can be created to address a specific organizational need. These advisory boards are usually short-lived and are disbanded as soon as their specific goals are met.

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Integrating into a Larger Governing Body

Many crisis nursery and respite care programs exist within a larger organization.

The umbrella organization which houses the crisis nursery or respite care program will likely have its own board of directors. It is crucial to the life of the program that the program advisory board and the board of directors of the umbrella organization develop an ongoing relationship.

Programs may have advisory boards which exist separately from the umbrella organization's board of directors. It is advisable to have one member from the board of directors be elected to the advisory board, or for an advisory board member to be elected to the board of directors. In either case, this will provide a direct link between the two bodies.

There needs to be constant communication between an individual program, its advisory board, the umbrella organization, and its board of directors. The ability to influence board policy with regard to a program's goals and objectives is directly affected by the program's visibility to the umbrella organization's board of directors.

Boards of Directors

A board of directors allows an organization the opportunity to receive the insight and the service of a group of individuals who are not directly employed by the program. Board members may be highly qualified and talented individuals who are volunteering their time to the organization because of a special interest in its services. Ideas and programs being examined by the staff can be presented to the board for discussion. Board members are a source of cost-free creative energy and public relations for the organization.

Legal Requirements for Boards of Directors

Many people wonder why organizations are structured to include boards. The answers are both practical and legal. A board provides one part of a system of checks and balances. An organization announces its intention to be overseen by an independent body when it incorporates. In essence, the board "owns" the organization and can be held legally accountable for all organizational actions.

The board is responsible for developing policy and providing direction to the executive director. As the governing body, the board ensures that the organization is acting within the parameters set by the articles of incorporation and the bylaws. The policies developed by the board are as legally binding as the articles and bylaws. Board members often carry extra insurance purchased through the organization to protect them from unforeseen legal problems.

Boards of Directors Responsibilities

Nonprofit boards of directors have a number of responsibilities to the organizations they serve. These responsibilities may include the following.

- ***Vision and Planning***. The board works with the executive director, and possibly other staff, to create a vision and mission for the organization, as well as setting a plan for its future. Plans are reviewed regularly and altered when needed.
- ***Development of Policy***. A major task of the board is the development of organizational policy. With policy in place, the staff is free to pursue the goals of the organization and to provide service to its consumers.
- ***Supervision of the Executive Director***. Most boards search for, hire, and evaluate the executive of the organization. Beyond those tasks, it is the job of the board to support the executive director in her/his work for the organization.
- ***Funding Leadership***. Organizations may assume it is the job of the executive director to raise funds. It is actually the joint task of the board and the executive to raise the funds necessary to support the organization.
- ***Financial Oversight***. Responsibility for budget oversight balances the responsibility of raising funds. Boards offer an impartial body that can review the organization's expenditures and income from month to month, as well as presiding over annual audits.
- ***Self-Assessment***. Boards need to conduct self-critiques to determine their effectiveness. A yearly review of activities and functions is useful.
- ***Planning and Implementing Public Relations***. As community members, the board is the ideal body to create and carry out a strategy for ensuring that the organization is visible to and is viewed favorably by the community it serves.

Fulfilling all of these responsibilities is a time-consuming process. Board members must not only have a commitment to the organizational values and goals, but must also have the time and energy necessary to effectively lead the organization. An active, well focused board can help ensure the success and long-term stability of any nonprofit organization.

Recruitment of Board Members

The membership for advisory boards and boards of directors should reflect the diversity of the community, including representatives from various cultures, socioeconomic groups, and settings (rural, urban, etc.) as appropriate.

Building successful boards requires effective recruitment.

- Recruitment should follow a well-developed plan. The executive director and the board must begin by reading the bylaws. The bylaws define who will select new board members and the process to be followed. Most organizations designate a nominating committee to recruit and select new members. However, all board and staff members should be looking for candidates year round.
- In initiating a recruitment campaign, the nominating committee, with assistance from the board chair and executive director, must identify the skills needed on the board. Desirable skills may be specific to the service provided by the organization (e.g., child development) or they may be general to nonprofit boards (e.g., accounting).
- Once the nominating committee compiles a list of the desired skills and characteristics, it can compare the nomination list with the skills and characteristics of the current board members. This process will pinpoint the gaps existing on the current board and help target the search for candidates.
- Having a job description for board members will make recruitment easier. This will insure that both staff and board members have a common understanding of the board's role in the organization.
- Potential board members may be found in the immediate circle of organizational consumers as well as civic, business and human services organizations. Others may be identified through professional groups that lack representation on the current board (i.e., an accountant or early intervention specialist). While it can be helpful to have influential community members on the board, these individuals must care about the services offered by the organization.
- It is best to contact potential board members personally. The board chair, a member of the nominating committee, or the executive director, can invite the candidate to a meeting to discuss potential membership. A follow-up packet of materials is sent after the call to provide the candidate with additional information about the organization. Sending these materials will also send a message about the organization's professionalism.
- When meeting with individual candidates, the organizational representatives will discuss the specific contributions that each can make to the organization. Having a job description available during this meeting will help clarify the specific role the individual is being asked to fill. It is important to be specific about the reasons for approaching potential board members. This will allow individuals to understand what is being asked of them and whether they have the time and energy to fulfill that request.

While advisory boards and boards of directors have some different functions and levels of responsibility, the manner in which the administrative staff work with them can be similar. Training individuals to be effective members of an advisory board or board of directors, maintaining their participation over time, and educating the veteran members, are crucial to a successful board and administrative staff relationship.

Training and Retention

Once individuals have agreed to serve on the board of directors or advisory board, it is important to orient them to the organization. Board members need to understand the organization to serve it effectively. Providing them with background information, a tour of the facilities, a meeting with key staff members, and, perhaps, assigning each a mentor from the current board, will help them to become involved more easily. Giving new members concrete tasks will allow them to develop a sense of belonging. It will also provide the board with an opportunity to give new members formal recognition for their specific contributions early in their term of service.

Every board member will need ongoing training to remain on the forefront of organizational issues. This can be accomplished at regular meetings or at designated training meetings. In addition, annual board retreats are a good method for integrating new members, building cohesion among members, and taking time to reflect on the past year's performance. Ongoing training will help board members feel educated and involved.

While training board members and using their skills effectively will help keep members interested in serving, board members also need public recognition for the important volunteer work they are doing for the organization. Holding an annual recognition dinner is an easy and fun way to recognize board members, as well as other volunteers. Taking the time to say thank you can go a long way in maintaining a positive relationship with the board, and in so doing, with the entire community.

Energizing Existing Boards

At times, the relationship between a board and staff may become stagnant. This is a natural occurrence and should not cause alarm. The executive director has several options for handling the challenge of re-energizing an existing board.

The direct one-to-one approach is often effective. The executive director can schedule private meetings with individual board members to determine the nature of their interest and commitment. This will enable the executive to

match the talents and interests of board members with appropriate committees and/or tasks. This also conveys the conviction that each board member can perform functions important to the organization's future.

Another way to energize an existing board is through training. Training allows a board to see itself in a new light. The training may be general instruction concerning the function of board members, or it may be specific to a task in which the board will engage.

It is also possible for boards to be energized by the addition of new members. An executive director may recommend new members to the board chairperson or nominating committee, depending upon the established process. New members provide new vision and commitment to the organization.

Conclusion

Working with a board of directors or an advisory board can be an exciting and supporting experience to the executive of an organization. When the legal requirements and the political influences are understood and worked with, the result can be the addition of a body of individuals who support every project of the agency and help it attain success.

Resources

National Center for Nonprofit Boards, 2000 L Street, N.W., Suite 411, Washington, DC 20036, (202) 452-6262.

Society for Nonprofit Organizations, 6314 Odara Road, Suite 1, Madison, WI 53719, (608) 274-9777.

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